

One is the Loneliest Number

Venomous Spiders in British Columbia

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I am regularly asked about venomous spiders that occur in British Columbia and I always state the truth: pretty well all spiders have venom. But then I follow that truth with another: there is only

one spider in BC with venom that is harmful to people, the Western Black Widow (*Latrodectus hesperus*).



Western Black Widow (*Latrodectus hesperus*)
Credit: RBCM

Almost all spiders have venom because that is what spiders use to subdue their prey. The key is whether they pose a danger to people since there are more than 800 species of spiders in BC and most are smaller than an apple seed.

The Western Black Widow spider has venom that is toxic to humans. A bite from this spider does require medical attention but that doesn't mean we need to fear it—the incidence of people being bitten by it, or any other spider, is extremely low. Even though it lives in populated regions such as along the east coast of Vancouver Island and the Thompson-Okanagan, most people have never seen one. It is a shy species whose first reaction is to hide when threatened.

There are other spiders that occur in BC that people have heard are dangerous, but in fact are not. An example of this is the non-native Hobo Spider (*Eratigena agrestis*). Sometimes the species name *agrestis* is misinterpreted as 'aggressive'. In fact it actually means 'of the fields', which is where it likes to live. Research has proven that this spider does not warrant a reputation for being dangerous since its venom is not toxic to us.

An infamous spider that has never been found in BC is the Brown Recluse (*Loxosceles reclusa*). It lives in the southeastern United States and is similar to all spiders in that the incidence of it biting is very low.

There are some species of spiders in British Columbia that are large enough that a bite by one would be noticed, and there is one species of introduced spider, the Brown House Spider (*Steatoda grossa*), whose bite feels like a bee sting. In all of the years I have been talking to people about spiders, there have been only two times I have heard about the Brown House Spider biting someone. Both times the spider was in clothing that had been on the floor and when the individual got dressed, they crushed it against themselves. Imagine how the spider felt!

So, one really is the loneliest number when it comes to 'dangerous' spiders in British Columbia. The key thing to know about spiders is that they are not vegetarian, making them important predators of insects and other arthropods in our homes, gardens, agricultural areas and wild places. Instead of feeling fearful, appreciate them for their role in controlling pests.